



Washington State Senate

Senator Don Benton

17th Legislative District

2002 Pre-Legislative Session Newsletter

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Special Committees: Legislative
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Dear neighbors:

It has been quite a year. Just when we thought we had recovered from the earthquake, the energy crisis and the drought emergency, we were hit with tragic events that considerably dwarfed those problems.

At no time in our nation's great history have we been forced to deal with such devastation. Although the tragic events of September 11 were not physically a direct attack upon us here in the Northwest, they definitely hit home.

Some of you may have loved ones who were directly impacted by the attacks, and to you, my thoughts and prayers have been with you.

For those of you who have had to comfort and explain to your children why a thing like this could happen, I have had to do the same with my children. It is not easy to explain how people can be so evil.

So where do we go from here? We must show our strength — our strength as individuals, our strength as families, our strength as a state, and our strength as a nation. As difficult as it may be, we must go on with our lives and we must get back to work. As your elected state senator, for me that means continuing the business of the people.

I will go to Olympia this legislative session with an even greater appreciation for the freedoms and liberties afforded to us under the U.S. Constitution and the process by which we govern our great nation.

Rest assured, I will continue to represent you and to serve the 17th Legislative District to the best of my ability.

I wish all of you a happy holiday season! Please remember our military personnel during the holidays, especially those who are stationed overseas.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Don Benton".

Senator Don Benton

Patriotic Promotions

After the tragic events of September 11, patriotism in our country was taken to a whole new level.

Residents rushed to donate money, blood and anything else they thought might help. In addition, the proud display of the American flag on anything from cars to homes to business windows became the latest symbol of our nation's strength and support for one another. Everyday citizens became patriots.



Pledge of Allegiance

Thinking of the importance of the American flag at a time like this, I contacted 14 area schools to ensure they were conducting the Pledge of Allegiance every morning. Because it is required by state law, the vast majority assured me they performed the flag salute on a daily basis, some even led by students over the intercom.

Some schools, however, leave it up to individual classrooms to carry out the Pledge of Allegiance every morning. Unfortunately, this has led to a potential lapse, resulting in some school children left without the honor of performing the flag salute.

If this is important to you, as it is to me, ask your child if he or she rises each morning to recite the flag salute in his or her first class. If it is not performed in your child's classroom every day, inform the principal. The principal may not know unless a parent tells him or her. If you feel uncomfortable contacting the principal, call my office and I will be happy to notify him or her without revealing your child's name.

Display the Flag

It has become very important to many people to display the American flag, including school district bus drivers. To protect their rights, I contacted local school districts and the state superintendent of public instruction in Olympia,

advocating for the right of bus drivers to display the American flag or any other patriotic symbol if they so chose — as long as it poses no safety hazards. In no time, the state superintendent's office sent a memo to all school districts authorizing this action. The state superintendent deserves our praise for her quick action.

A National Holiday

This session, I plan to introduce a memorial to Congress, proposing that September 11 be recognized as a national holiday, Patriot's Day. The American people deserve a time to reflect upon these tragic events, the challenges that have been made to our freedoms and liberties, and to honor the patriots and heroes who have emerged from these trying times.

For this memorial to be implemented, it must first pass the state Legislature and be sent to Congress. Congress must then pass the measure and the president must approve it. I have already contacted President Bush asking for his support.

For a copy of the resolution, please contact my office, or visit my website during session.

The State Budget



As you may know, during the 2001 session, the Legislature approved a \$22.8 billion state operating budget. At the time, I expressed grave concerns that the budget was

not sustainable. Short of deep cuts in state services and spending down all of our reserves, our only option would be to increase taxes. I voted against the budget last June for this reason.

In light of the events of September 11 and the ongoing war, our nation as a whole is struggling with a downturn in the economy. Massive layoffs in the aerospace and high-tech sectors have

made people even more cautious about spending, and consumer confidence is at its lowest level since 1994.

Over 55 percent of our state revenues are generated by sales tax, and with a strong economy over the past several years the state has not been forced to make difficult budget decisions. The declining economy and resulting reduction in consumer purchases will inevitably lead to those tough decisions.

Our challenge during the 2002 budget discussions will be to find ways to make up for a potential \$1 billion shortfall, while ensuring necessary public health, safety and education programs remain intact.

I expect these difficult decisions to be quite a challenge, but I will work to see that essential services are maintained without tax increases.

Working For Washington

When Boeing uprooted its company headquarters for the “greener pastures” of Chicago, and later announced layoffs of about 30,000 workers, it sent a clear message — **Washington is no longer the business-friendly environment it once was.**

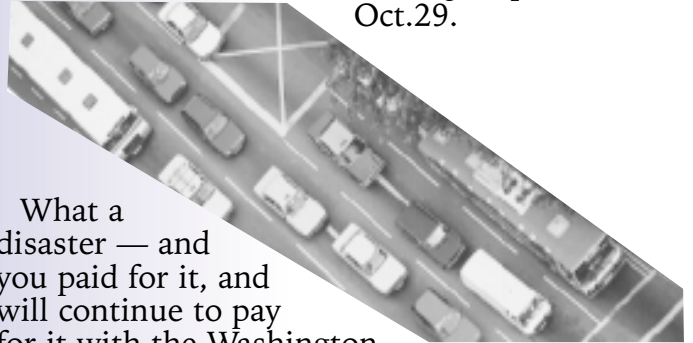
Given this, it is vital we work to improve the business climate in Washington State. Without thriving businesses in our state, working families suffer. We must provide reasons for existing businesses to stay in Washington and incentives for new businesses to set up shop in Washington. That will provide good family-wage jobs for our residents.

In an effort to accomplish just that, this fall I held meetings with local business leaders. My goal was to reach out to local businesses by listening to concerns about how state policies impact them, and to take note of suggested ways in which those policies could be changed to benefit business throughout the state. Among the most commonly discussed issues were regulations, business-related taxes, and health care.

Much of what our area business leaders contributed will be incorporated into a legislative package this session, which will be aimed to enhance the business environment in Washington State.

HOV Fiasco

As many of you may know, the new high-occupancy vehicle lane, part of the \$50 million I-5 project from 99th Street to the Main Street interchange, opened Oct.29.



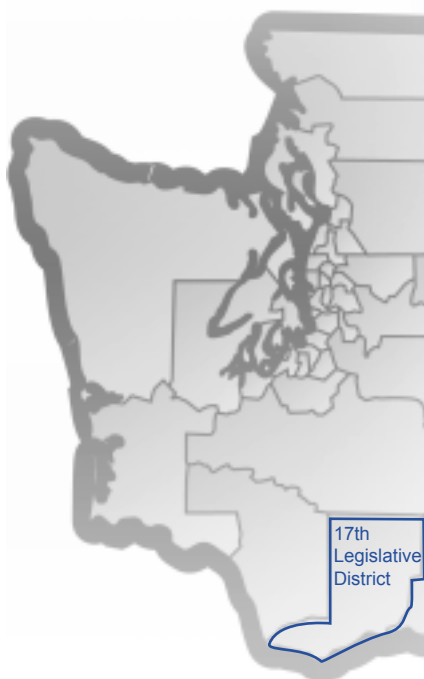
What a disaster — and you paid for it, and will continue to pay for it with the Washington State Department of Transportation's (WSDOT) planned monitoring of the year-long “experiment.”

The Federal Highway Administration (FHA) requires 600 vehicles per hour for federally funded HOV lanes. This experiment does not even come close. Estimated from a five-minute sampling, *The Columbian* very generously reported 400 vehicles per hour. Eyewitness accounts from state Representatives Tom Mielke and Jim Dunn reported only 180 vehicles per hour.

Why didn't our local Regional Transportation Council (RTC) and DOT know this lane wouldn't meet federal requirements? Why did the DOT push the HOV lane ahead of the rest of the plan, which would have allowed for smoother transition and less congestion by expanding the Park and Rides? Did they consider these things, or did they simply ignore the warnings? Many other legislators and I spoke out against the fiasco and were completely ignored by the mayors of Battle Ground, Washougal and Vancouver, and all three Clark County commissioners. Why? What is their agenda?

Too many questions remain, and the only observable result this experiment has accomplished is wasted tax dollars, gridlock, frustration, road rage and a dramatic increase in accidents. We must make the logical choice of reopening the HOV lane to *ALL* drivers, 24 hours a day. I hope other local leaders join me in this common-sense solution or it could prove difficult to secure additional highway construction dollars in the future.

REDISTRICTING



Based upon the results of last year's Census, the legislative district boundaries in Washington State will be redrawn. Because our area has grown in population so dramatically since the last Census — more than any other area in the state — I will no longer have the honor of serving many of you who are reading this newsletter after the new borders are approved by the Legislature.

It is possible that all of Skamania County, along with Washougal and Camas, could be moved to another district. I feel strong personal ties to these communities, and rest assured I will continue to represent your interests even if you are not within my new district boundaries.

For those who remain within the 17th Legislative District, I look forward to continuing my aggressive representation of your interests.

Thank you for allowing me the privilege and honor of serving you.

Senator Don Benton

A 2002 Pre-Session Newsletter from your Senator

Have a
Happy & safe
Holiday season!

Senator Don Benton
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